

Are All Our Readings Misreadings?: Derrida, The Flickering A (A Look At Derrida On Interpretation)

Joseph Partain
Belmont College

All our readings are misreadings (spoken at Vanderbilt University, 1989).

I try to write the question: (what is) meaning to say? Therefore it is necessary in such a space, and guided by such a question, that writing literally mean nothing. Not that it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning. It simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of the exhaustion of meaning. To risk meaning nothing is to start to play, and first enter into the play of **différance** which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences... this 'meaning-to-say-nothing' is not, you will agree, the most assured of exercises.

'Thought'... means nothing: it is the substantified void of a highly derivative ideality, the effect of a **différance** of forces, the illusory autonomy of a discourse or consciousness whose hypostasis is to be deconstructed, whose 'causality' is to be analyzed, etc.... Whatever will continue to be called thought, and which, for example, will designate the deconstruction of logocentrism, means nothing, for in the last analysis it no longer derives from 'meaning.' Wherever it operates, 'thought' means nothing (P, pp. 14, 49).

In broaching your question, you also noted that I meant something and that, even if you did not understand it completely, you were convinced of my wanting-to-say-something. I am less sure of this than you (Wood, p. 89).

We should note that Derrida's saying is not "some of our readings are misreadings," nor "our readings tend to be misreadings," but the universal, all-inclusive assertion, "all our readings are misreadings." What we have here is not a difficulty in communication but absence of communication, and not a difficulty to be dealt with and minimized but an absence never to be encroached upon, a gap never to be narrowed.

To use the metaphor of a gun, it isn't "all our firings are misses" but "all our firings are misfirings," i.e. the gun does not go off. When we read, the hammer hits the head of the bullet but there is only a "click." Derrida is dealing with more than the inevitability of misinterpretations or an anarchy of perspectivism in the handling of texts (though he is saying those things). In this paper, I would like to attempt:

- (1) An identification of who Derrida is and what he is doing. In this section, I will seek to show that Derrida and his work constitute a sign of the meaninglessness or nothingness that lies just beneath the surface of existence, that his role is philosophical.
- (2) An illustration of Derrida's deliberate "misreadings" of texts, how Derrida responds when he is misread, and briefly how deconstruction is playing a role in the literary community (a look at Stanley Fish) in dealing with texts.
- (3) A call for an appreciation and qualified inclusion of Derrida in textual interpretation.

I. Who Is Jacques Derrida?

By this, I do not mean things like his being an Algerian Jew who came to France when he was nineteen, but who is he in terms of his philosophical/literary impact on the world? For that, I know of no better starting place than the address Derrida gave in 1968 in Paris called simply, "*Différance*." I purposely come to the text for his own voice, the record of his own words, so as much as possible to let his speech identify him. He begins by saying,

I will speak, therefore, of a letter. Of the first letter, if the alphabet, and most of the speculations which have ventured into it, are to be believed. I will speak, therefore, of the letter **a**, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there into the writing of the word **différance**...

Now it happens, I would say in effect, that this graphic difference (**a** instead of **e**), this marked difference between two apparently vocal notations between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard (MP, pp. 3-4).

Derrida continues by saying that the presence of the letter **a** in its capital form (**A**) is compared in shape to an Egyptian pyramid in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* so that it remains "silent, secret, and discreet as a tomb" and "not far from announcing the death of the tyrant" (MP, p. 4). The fact that **a** and **e** cannot

be differentiated in the last syllable of differ(e/a)n^{ce} when spoken but only when written or read show us there is a “silence” in “so-called phonetic writing,” a failure to convey difference, and consequently, (according to Derrida) “there is no phonetic writing.”

In logic, Derrida’s argument is a blatant fallacy—the error of generalizing from an exception (a and e being indistinguishable in sound in a particular word is used to conclude that all letters fail to denote distinct sounds). Most of the time letters do a very good job of distinguishing and differentiating sounds and that is why phonics are used in spelling in spite of all the exceptions. But if we reacted this way and rejected Derrida’s words as nonsense, we would be extremely unimaginative and philosophically dull.

What if one were to begin with Nietzschean meaninglessness and decide to use that which is most pretentious in the conveyance of meanings—i.e., words—as an effigy of the non-existent Word (considered philosophically or theologically), an effigy not to be burned but dismantled (deconstructed) in order to signify the end of meaning? What if the death of God and Truth in Heaven is followed by the death of Man and truth on Earth? What if philosophy’s debunking of Plato’s Big Meanings undercuts the integrity of all little and ordinary meanings? If one were to take a word, then, like *difference*, and observe what happens when the e becomes an a, listen to the failure of a text to carry life, significant sound distinguishing one letter from another, one feels the instability of words and wonders about other losses inherent with language. Derrida is understandable in these terms as a philosopher making an effigy of language—disrupting and deconstructing it—to protest the Silence in the universe, a Silence ready to quake under every word like a city built on a fault line.

Who is Jacques Derrida? He is that indeterminate sound, that flickering between the e and the a, that silent and open space between the r and the n of differ_nce which disrupts the e, x’s it out, makes it a space, then an a, then a space, then an e, and from then on the e and all textuality is never the same. When Derrida speaks in conventional, linguistic terms (though always tentatively), the e is at work. When Derrida exists in movement as space to introduce the a, he is disruption, ever-changing, Heraclitean energy, intervention, and play. When Derrida operates as the a, he uses words to undercut words (“writing” means “nothing”) and metaphysics to

undercut metaphysics (“‘thought’ means nothing”). Consequently, with the energy and change characteristic of Derrida, it is difficult when questioning him or reading his texts to know if he is the *e* (saying the tentative sayable), the *space* (disrupting the sayable), or the *a* (using the sayable to point to the Unsayable).

Derrida exists, then, as a philosophical sign. He is the flickering *a* behind the *e* reminding us of the tentativeness, the thinness of all human meanings and of the deep silence just below. He is the *A* as Egyptian pyramid announcing the death of the tyrant which is all the language ever spoken—language which promised us The Truth, The Word, The Meaning of the Universe commandeered directly or indirectly by God or Man at the center. There is no ground and no center, and Derrida exists to undermine and unsettle, to “clean house” with respect to Western metaphysics.

He resists identifying himself because he is against the very presumption of classification and naming. He resists the tombstone existence of concepts buried within words. So, we can save ourselves time by not asking him who he is. If we want to know who he is we must (ironically) try not to misread him. If he intends or means anything in all this movement, it is, “Play, for Nothingness is with us and at the door.”

Derrida as the Flickering *A* is playful and so playful that even sympathizers are sometimes embarrassed with his antics. John Llewelyn in his *Derrida on the Threshold of Sense* says that what Rorty and others find so shocking about Derrida is his “multilingual puns, joke etymologies, allusions from anywhere, and phonic and typographical gimmicks” (p. 114). (Frankly, I am surprised at Llewelyn because in that same book he refers to something Derrida considers a fallacy in Freud’s thinking but uses the spelling, p-h-a-l-l-u-s-y, without any quotation marks to clarify if Llewelyn or Derrida is “fooling around” here.)

Why does Derrida refuse the label of “negative theology” and all other labels? Because he refuses the Western metaphysical constructs in which all language is enmeshed, because he refuses the pegging of meaning, the confidence of thought or meaning existing or having a happy transmission in words. Derrida says,

To be very schematic I would say that the difficulty of defining and therefore also of translating the word ‘deconstruction’ stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all

the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or to that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc. And that goes for the word, the very unity of the word deconstruction, as for every word.

Consequently, Derrida also says,

All sentences of the type 'deconstruction is X' or 'deconstruction is not X' a priori miss the point, which is to say that they are at least false (Wood, p. 4).

Again, I think there is a blatant problem with what Derrida is saying on a literal level. Obviously, both deconstruction and Derrida come to us through words, concepts, assertions, etc. Here is someone who works to keep himself (as he says) on the outer edge of "the exhaustion of meaning," but nonetheless, without thought and its conveyance through words there would be no deconstruction and no Derrida, so it begs the question to act as if Derrida can never be conceptualized. If he spoke only gibberish, he would have been escorted to an asylum and we would be reading someone else.

The play does have a feel of negative theology, though, much like the Israelites who in the absence of a Moses on the mount receiving the Word of God make a golden calf (a fiction), engorge themselves with food, then rise up "to play." There is a real sense of recess from absolutes and eternal values felt in Derrida's textual play. There is an anti-metaphysical largeness and expansiveness to his "fooling" with texts, an equivocation and playful disguise, that would have echoed well in Zarathustra's cave.

It is interesting to note as well that when Derrida writes to a Japanese friend who is looking for a suitable translation for "deconstruction," he speaks of dictionary definitions such as "disarranging the construction of" and "to disassemble the parts of a whole." He also traces the history of deconstruction as a reaction to structuralism, "an anti-structuralist gesture," even a "demolition" of any confidence in language as it stands tied to Western metaphysics. So Derrida does not entirely dispense with words to define deconstruction. (He knows how to don the disguise of the tentative e.)

II. Derrida And Misreadings

Among the proponents of deconstruction there is an effort to minimize any adverse impact Derrida might have with "hands on" textual interpretation because there are those who feel that Derrida could wreak

havoc with his “all our readings are misreadings” and his textual nihilism. First of all, it seems to me that people like Stanley Fish with his “Is there a Text in this Class?” really do raise the spectre of literary communities acting out a Derridean, anti-metaphysical, nihilistic approach to texts. When we read Fish and he says “that the notions of ‘same’ or ‘different’ texts are fictions” (p. 169), that “perspectival perception is all there is” (p. 365), and that “no reading, however outlandish it might appear, is inherently an impossible one” (p. 347), we see the Flickering A and hear Derrida’s laughter (p. 169). Fish does not believe there are accurate or proper readings of texts, but that the reader (and ultimately the literary institution) arbitrarily gives or assigns the text its meaning. (The only check on “arbitrary” is the voice of the literary community.) Here the text is not the final reference to evaluate readings. Interpretations will change and evolve as the community changes with the passage of time. Meaning is not transcendental or fixed: “Heaven and Earth” will pass away, and so will today’s interpretation.

Derrida himself has no hesitation in misreading a text and assigning it the meaning he wants it to have. For example, I laughed when I first read Derrida’s statement that “for Nietzsche ‘the great principal activity is unconscious(ness)’” and that “all of Nietzsche’s thought” is “a critique of philosophy as an active indifference to difference” (MP, p. 17). The great principal activity for Nietzsche is the Will to Power, and the only one for whom the critique of philosophy must be for its indifference to difference is **Derrida**—not Nietzsche. But then again, did not Heidegger in his book on Nietzsche give us more of Heidegger than Nietzsche and before that did not Nietzsche usurp David Hume’s work by saying in *Twilight of the Idols*, “I was the first to formulate... that there are no moral facts?” Derrida seems to be operating faithfully within a tradition. After all if perspectivism is all there is (and Nietzsche did say that) why not impose our perspective (textual violence) very forthrightly and unapologetically upon everything we read and represent? Where all is seeming and nothing is real, why should we care about maintaining the integrity of what someone else has written—especially if we do not think that what someone else has written is objectively decipherable to begin with?

But we do mind when we are misread by others, even Derrida minds. Michael Fischer in *Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference?* mentions the irony of Derrida’s feeling misread by John Searle in a literary

critique of Derrida. Derrida says things like “by ignoring this or that moment of the text” and refers to Searle’s “autistic representation” and obliterating contexts (p. 40). In the real world where texts do have an objectivity that minds can subjectively apprehend, people feel hurt when “justice” is not done to their text. (In Irene Harvey’s book on Derrida, she apologizes to Derrida—though she is herself a deconstructionist—for any failure to do justice to his texts.) This is worlds away from both Derrida’s and Fish’s tentativeness about language and textuality—the inevitability of misreadings. If misreadings are the rule and not the exception, why should Derrida be upset and Harvey apologize? Is not their behavior here a tacit adherence to both the possibility and desirability of accurate textual readings? Meaninglessness at the center of the universe is fine to talk about when we are dealing with someone else’s texts but when it comes to our own, suddenly it becomes important to believe that there is a ground and center for discussion: we become logocentric when it is **our** logos at the center.

III. A Call For Inclusion

Finally, I would like to suggest, in what might seem to be a contradiction of all that I have said heretofore, how I think Derrida should be included in our approach to the interpretation of texts. Needless to say, Derrida is with us to stay. His presence as what I have called the Flickering A is as symbolic and important for philosophy/literature as Socrates the gadfly who, in a sense, went about “deconstructing” everyone’s claims to wisdom, and Heraclitus for whom all reality is disruption and change.

That Derrida exists as a sign means that he is not to be taken as a standard or literary method for interpretation. As Joseph Margolis says, deconstruction is “not a canon of procedures or criteria for testing the adequacy of procedures for interpreting texts or for assessing the cognitive fit between interpretation and text...” (Margolis, p. 148). When Isaiah walked around naked for 3 years as a sign of Israel’s coming captivity, his action was not intended as a dress code for his time. Derrida is a sign for the implications of there being no God in the universe, no Word behind all human words, no Text written in Nature or Scripture which in some way supports all human textuality.

Positively speaking, in literary interpretation where Derrida operates as a sign we are less likely to feel we have nailed down any and all

possibilities arising from a text's meaning. We will watch for the Flickering A, the unsaid and unsayable behind a text, the meanings that fall through the cracks or get lost through the structure. The Flickering A makes us respect the element of surprise and helps us resist the tendency to capitulate to the "letter that kills." Life has movement, surprise, and disguise to it, and nothing is more deadly than the tendency in classrooms to simply "crank out" textbook interpretations that leave both teacher and student cold.

With these qualifications of Derrida's role, I think his inclusion to the literary community is significant and worthwhile.

Works Cited

- [P] Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Tr. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- [MP] Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Tr. by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Fischer, Michael. *Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference? Poststructuralism and the Defense of Poetry in Modern Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985.
- Llewelyn, John. *Derrida on the Threshold of Sense*. New York: St. Martin, 1986.
- Margolis, Joseph. "Deconstruction; Or The Mystery Of The Mystery Of The Text" in *Hermeneutics And Deconstruction*, Silverman and Hugh J., eds. New York: SUNY Albany, 1985.
- Wood, David and Robert Bernasconi, ed. *Derrida and Différance*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988.